

Amendments to the Claims:

The following listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

Listing of Claims:

1. (currently amended) A rigid or semi-rigid container assembly (10, 110) comprising a support (20, 120) and a frame (30, 130), wherein the support (20, 120) comprises a peripheral flange (21, 121) outwardly extending from the support (20, 120) and an open mouth (5, 105), and the frame (30, 130) comprises a rim (32, 132), which is shaped to cooperate with the flange (21, 121) to be releasably secured onto the support (20, 120) when the container assembly (10, 110) is in a closed state, characterized in that the rim (32, 132) of the frame (30, 130) extends only over a fraction of the flange (21, 121), thus leaving at least an inner edge part (22, 122) of the flange (21, 121) not covered by the rim (32, 132) of the frame (30, 130), wherein the frame defines a central opening (35) which leaves the open mouth of the support uncovered by the frame when the container assembly is in the closed state, and the open mouth of the support remains uncovered in the closed state so that products can be loaded onto the support through the central opening of the frame, and wherein both the rim of the frame and the part of the flange not covered by the rim are adapted to form a seal with a thermoplastic film.

2. (previously presented) The container assembly (10, 110) according to claim 1 wherein the support (20, 120) comprises a flat bottom wall (24, 124), upwardly extending side-walls (23, 123), and the flange (21, 121) extending outwardly from the side-walls.
3. (original) The container assembly (10) according to claim 1 wherein the frame (30) extends around the whole perimeter of the support (20).
4. (previously presented) The container assembly (110) according to claim 1 wherein the frame (130) is incomplete and extends around a major portion of the perimeter of the support (120).
5. (previously presented) The container assembly (10) according to claim 1 wherein the frame (30) further comprises a skirt (31, 131).
6. (withdrawn) A method of packaging a food product in a rigid or semi-rigid container assembly comprising the steps of: providing a container assembly (10, 110) according to claim 1 with the frame (30, 130) engaged with the support (20, 120) and a product (80) loaded thereon; placing a thermoplastic film (60) over the container assembly (10, 110) and the product (80); optionally evacuating and /or gas flushing with a suitably selected purging gas or gas mixture the area between the thermoplastic film (60) and the support (20, 120); and sealing the thermoplastic film (60) on the rim (32, 132) of the frame (30, 130) of the assembly and on the part (22, 122) of the flange

of the support (20, 120) not covered by the rim (32, 132) of the frame (30, 130).

7. (withdrawn) The method of packaging of claim 6 wherein the thermoplastic film (60) is an oriented and heat-shrinkable film and the method further comprises the step of subjecting said thermoplastic film (60) to a sufficiently high temperature during or after the sealing step to shrink it.

8. (withdrawn) The method of packaging according to claim 6 wherein the thermoplastic film (60) forms a permanent seal (61) with the rim (32, 132) of the frame (30, 130) of the container assembly (10, 110) and a peelable seal (62) with the part (22, 122) of the flange of the support (20, 120) not covered by the rim (32, 132) of the frame (30, 130).

9. (withdrawn) The method of packaging according to claim 6 further characterized in that, before evacuating the area between the thermoplastic film (60) and the support (20, 120), the thermoplastic film (60) is heated and stretched upwardly away from the product ; the area between the thermoplastic film (60) and the support (20, 120) is evacuated; the thermoplastic film (60) is allowed to drape over and around the product (80) and is additionally sealed on the whole area of the support (20, 120) not covered by the product (80).

10. (withdrawn) The method of packaging according to claim 9 wherein after the evacuation step is completed the area between the thermoplastic film (60) and the support (20, 120) is flushed with a suitably selected purging gas or gas mixture to leave a very low residual gas pressure.

11. (withdrawn) The method of packaging according to claim 9 wherein the thermoplastic film (60) forms a permanent seal (61) with the rim (32, 132) of the frame (30, 130) of the container assembly (10, 110) and a peelable seal (62) with the part of the support (20, 120) not covered by the rim (32, 132) of the frame (30, 130) or the product (80).

12. (withdrawn) A package (90) comprising a rigid or semi-rigid container assembly (10, 110) according to claim 1, a product (80) placed therein and a thermoplastic film (60) placed over the container assembly (10, 110) and the product (80) and sealed on the rim (32, 132) of the frame (30, 130) and on the part (22, 122) of the flange of the support (20, 120) not covered by the rim (32, 132) of the frame (30, 130), characterized in that the thermoplastic film (60) contacts the product (80) in at least one point.

13. (withdrawn) The package according to claim 12 wherein the thermoplastic film (60) forms a permanent seal (61) with the rim (32, 132) of the frame (30, 130) and a peelable seal (62) with the part (22, 122) of the flange of the support (20, 120) not covered by the rim (32, 132) of the frame (30, 130).

14. (withdrawn) The package according to claim 12 wherein the thermoplastic film (60) forms a tight skin around the product (80) and is additionally sealed onto the whole area of the support (20, 120) not covered by the product (80).
15. (withdrawn) The package according to claim 14 wherein the thermoplastic film (60) forms a permanent seal (61) with the rim (32, 132) of the frame (30, 130) and a peelable seal (62) with the part of the support (20, 120) not covered by the rim (32, 132) of the frame (30, 130) or the product (80).
16. (previously presented) The container assembly according to claim 1, wherein the rim of the frame is further adapted to form a permanent seal with the thermoplastic film; and
the part of the flange not coved by the rim is further adapted to form a peelable seal with the thermoplastic film.
17. (previously presented) The container assembly according to claim 16, wherein the part of the flange not coved by the rim is further adapted to form a hermetic seal with the thermoplastic film.
18. (previously presented) The container assembly according to claim 1, wherein the rim is reclosably secured on the flange.